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## Narrative Metalepsis as Diegetic Concept in Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010)

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**Abstract.** The paper aims to revitalise Gérard Genette's literary term of 'metalepsis' within a cinematic context,<sup>1</sup> emphasising the expression's creative potentials for both analytical and creative approaches. Through its 'mainstream complexity,' Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception* provides a novel and, at best, progressive contribution to contemporary Hollywood cinema, exemplified in its playful take on the diversified possibilities that the metaleptic logic allows. Nolan hereby (and similarly to *Memento* and *The Prestige*) follows his *auteur* affinity of converting, moreover, converging narrative and cognitive values into and within a fictional story. By introducing a fantastic, but at least conceivably possible futuristic world of permeable dreams in *Inception*, Nolan 'diegetises' the narrative feature of the embedded structures' metaleptic transgressions, and inversely, by thoughtfully considering its viewer's abilities of comprehension, 'narrativises' human cognitive skills into storytelling forms.

### Analytical and Creative Powers of Metalepsis

Gérard Genette's analytical investigation of modern multi-layered literary discourses (from Proust to Robbe-Grillet, from Sterne to Genet) required addressing new narrative strategies and their altered reading experiences. The exploration concluded in coining the narrative term of 'metalepsis,' introduced and defined by Genette as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse (as in Cortazar)" (1980, 234–235). Genette's permissive idea of

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1 "Although research articles analyzing specific metaleptic instances that we see in films are not as numerous as the ones referring to literature, we can say that in the last decade the term 'metalepsis' has been widely used by film criticism, albeit mainly with a somewhat simplified meaning referring to a structure of 'world within a world' and any kind of jump between diegetic and non-diegetic worlds" (Pethő 2010, 72). The present paper's aim of 'revitalisation' refers to this reasonable criticism in order to introduce an unconventional treatment of cinematic metalepsis.

narrative corruption between the discursive level of ‘telling’ and the diegetic level of ‘told,’ opened up unforeseen possibilities for analytical (I) as well as creative (II) approaches dealing with the unveiled logic of metalepsis.

(I) Looking at the impact on the analytical field, there are, at least, two types of approaches to metalepses originated in Genette’s theory. Marie-Laure Ryan introduces the options of violating distinct narrative levels between unintended, covertly ‘unnatural’ level-contaminations, that are ‘rhetorical metalepses,’ and deliberate, overtly playful transgressions that are ‘ontological metalepses’ (2006, 247). “The one based primarily in the (rhetorical) effects produced by representation through discourse or other semiotic means, the other in the problems of logical paradox encountered by modern science” (Pier 2011, 3).

Rhetorical metalepses most of the time do not aim at breaking the mimetic immersion of their readers; they are, according to William Nelles, “unmarked” (1992, 93) or by Genette, “ordinary and innocent” (1980, 235). For example, even the Danish Unnatural Narratologists, who otherwise convincingly point out creative discrepancies in narrational logic, would never claim that rhetorical metalepses deliberately violate the boundaries of realism (Alber et al. 2010). Unnatural transgressions in novels like *Moby Dick* or *Don Quixote* are not driven by any need for reflective or other counter-immersive strategies. Mostly, the necessity of information distribution is the only reason behind their unintended, ‘innocent’ metalepses, which appear as omniscient diegetic narrators and other seemingly transgressive paradoxes.<sup>2</sup> Still, sometimes hidden rhetorical transgressions may deliberately exploit one’s immersion, that is, the reader’s lack of awareness in recognising unnatural modes of information transfers. These subtle examples are able to establish, for example, unreliable but at least ambiguous textual strategies.<sup>3</sup>

Alternatively, ontological metalepses are “marked” (Nelles 1992, 93), “‘genuine’ type[s] of metalepses” (Wolf 2005, 89), which openly foreground their stories’ fantastic or metafictional quality. By laying bare their fictionality, ontological metalepses overtly establish fictional transgressions between diegetic and hypodiegetic levels. Original examples are Cortázar’s protagonist, who is apparently threatened by a character *from* a book he is reading (*Continuity of Parks*),<sup>4</sup> or Marc Forster’s 2006 film, in which Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) becomes

2 See Henrik Skov Nielsen’s (2004) meticulous analysis about Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and Brian D. Patrick’s (2008) clarification in relation to Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*.

3 About the possibility of this subtle text-strategy, see Maria Mäkelä on “Suspect Tellers and the Textuality of Fictional Minds” (forthcoming).

4 Genette goes as far as claiming: “Cortázar tells the story of a man assassinated by one of the characters in the novel he is reading” (1980, 234). The metaleptic loop, however textually strongly suggested, and therefore taken for granted by Genette, is actually never fully confirmed by the short story of Cortázar (de facto nobody is

aware of the fact that he is a fictional character *in* a still developing book of an author, whom he even shares the narrative level with (*Stranger Than Fiction*).

(II) If we look at the possible influences of Genette's term on creative approaches, one may initiate a third basic category beyond rhetorical and ontological, which I will call 'illusory metalepsis' for the moment. This exceeds the distinction that Genette, after revising his initial ideas, made between 'figural' and 'fictional' metalepsis (2004, 16–18), which more or less corresponds to Ryan's division of rhetoric and ontological, introduced earlier. Illusory metalepsis neither questions immersion, nor plays metanarrative games primarily. Its metalepsis emerges not from the transgressed intrusions between the levels of 'telling' and 'told,' but from the interferences among different levels of the 'told.' Comparable to the narrative strategy that appears in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, it cuts across fictionally embedded worlds, while staying on the same narrative level. Therefore illusory metalepsis is not a narrative but a diegetic concept. The overtly presented transgression neither runs into rhetorical discrepancies, nor raises ontological-existential questions within the story, as its intrusions are part of the established and accepted rules of the diegetic world.

## Fictionalisation of the Metaleptic Logic: from Illusory to Ontological Consequences

Christopher Nolan, in his 2010 movie *Inception*, plays with the inherent, diversified potential of metaleptic logic. Nolan fictionalises the inherently narrative feature,<sup>5</sup> when establishing a futuristic world with possibilities of transgressing layers of embedded dreams. This strategy, seemingly, does not offer a clear case of metaleptic violation, but gives a case for its illusory kind. It provides an example for the dispersion of narrative logic, what the notion of metalepsis allows, into the diegetic fantasy of the film. Nolan, through his fiction, 'diegetises' the narrative idea of permeable embedded narrative levels, shaping them like nesting layers of a Russian doll. The fiction, building up an embedded dream-reality, follows the spatial metaphor common to our language:

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assassinated in the novel). Against the otherwise plausible metaleptic reading, one could claim that the overlapping similarities between the diegetic and hypodiegetic worlds are only part of a strong coincidence, thus the claimed metalepsis is only a product of a rationalising inference of the reader.

- 5 Note that in most cases this relation is reversed, that is, narrative as well as stylistic solutions usually serve the needs of diegetic action. Another example of 'narrative fictionalisation' is (still staying 'in' Hollywood) Mennan Yapo's 2007 film *Premonition*, in which non-linear chronology, as an inherently narrative device, becomes part of the fictional world through a character (Linda, played by Sandra Bullock), who experiences and lives diegetic time out of order.

the deeper you dream, the deeper you descend into an embedded structure of dreams within dreams within dreams, and so on. [Fig. 1.]

Based on this initially narrative idea, Nolan's fiction, similarly to Montgomery Tully's *The Electronic Monster* (1960),<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ruben's *Dreamscape* (1984),<sup>7</sup> or Tarsem Singh's *The Cell* (2000), introduces a possible future, where scientific methods allow enter and influence over someone's dreams.<sup>8</sup> In this world, a team of 'dream experts' receives an assignment to invade a powerful tycoon's (Robert Fischer, played by Cillian Murphy) subconscious mind during his vulnerable dream state and plant an idea against the magnate's will, commissioned by Fischer's business rival, Mr. Saito (Ken Watanabe). Since the sneaky method of 'inception' is a known trick (at least in Nolan's fictional world), to avoid any suspicion about the origin of the planted idea, the team decides to create a less suspicious embedded dream-narrative, within which they can descend into the dream (hypodiegetic level 2) of the tycoon's dream (hypo 1).<sup>9</sup> Dramatic complications and unexpected obstacles force the team to extend the number of embedded dream-layers even further, that is, even deeper (hypo 3 and 4).<sup>10</sup> As Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), the leader of the 'dream experts,' says: "Downwards is the only way forwards." [See Fig. 2.]

As I previously emphasised, this strategy, in the first instance, does not offer a clear example of metalepsis, since the transgression is neither ontological, nor rhetorical, but it is in actuality fictitious and illusory. The metaleptic contamination happens not between narrative levels, but among the fantastic fiction's diegetic and hypodiegetic layers. The idea of 'entering' somebody's dream may sound weird, but from a fantastic story's narrative point of view it does not necessarily evoke a feeling that Genette called "un effect de bizarrerie" (1972, 244).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, one may even realise that it does not even interfere

6 The rightly forgotten *The Electronic Monster*, aka *The Dream Machine*, is probably the first film that deals with the idea of entering and influencing someone's dreams by 'scientific' methods (by the psycho-neurologist Philip Maxwell and his device).

7 Ruben's film is closely tied to the lesser-known novel *The Dream Master* (1966), written by Robert Zelazny. In 1981, Zelazny reworked his idea for cinematic adaptation, the outline of which was purchased by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and, in 1984, used as a base for the movie *Dreamscape* (Kovacs, 2009).

8 While Zelazny's scientific method for entering someone's dreams was a 'neuroparticipant therapy,' Nolan 'invents' a briefcase-size machine called a 'Portable Automated Somnacin IntraVenous (PASIV) Device' (Nolan 2010).

9 The analytical distinction between embedded narrative levels comes from Genette (1980 [1972]), however, the term 'hypodiegetic' was coined by Mieke Bal (1977, 24, 59–85) (replacing Genette's confusingly loaded term of 'metadiegetic').

10 Instead of naming the embedded levels *hypodiegetic*, *hypo-hypodiegetic*, *hypo-hypo-hypo-diegetic*, etc., I number them according to their position: the higher the number, the deeper they are in the embedded dream-structure.

11 I.e. "an effect of strangeness" (1980, 235).

with our extradiegetic reality either, bending the fantastic into the futuristic.<sup>12</sup> It is important to keep in mind that, within this fantastic-futuristic world, the 'real' flesh and blood bodies of the characters actually do nothing else but sleep during the flight between Sydney and Los Angeles (and therefore the majority of the duration of the film). Even though Cobb and his crew, together with Fischer, run through the film's action-packed 'inverse heist' whilst going deeper and deeper into each other's dreams, their tranquilised 'real' characters do not cease to exist on the airplane. Following the logic of the film's created fantasy-world, the protagonists' physical bodily presence exists only on this upper, diegetic level of the embedded structure, while their dream-state mind alone participates in the chain of actions in the deeper and deeper embedded hypodiegetic layers.<sup>13</sup> Nolan, guided by a rather precise cognitive hunch, reflects upon the difference between his characters' physiological bodies and their mentally experiencing minds. Mal (Marion Cotillard), Cobb's deceased wife, aptly sums up this difference: "Pain is in the mind."

Fortunately, the case is not as simple as can be concluded from the above. While in *Inception* the fictionally (thus neither narratively, nor ontologically) embedded dream-structure only imitates the metaleptic logic, an additional diegetic law is introduced, which necessarily qualifies the film as a 'proper' metaleptic narrative. Both Nolan's, as well as, for example, Ruben's film raise the dramatic stakes of the dream-invading idea by creating a rule, which establishes a bi-directional physical and thus body-related contamination among the embedded dream-layers. This simply means that, as much as diegetic actions have consequences on the hypodiegetic levels of dreams, dreams also have consequences on the frame story of the diegetic reality.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the attempt of planting an idea into someone's mind is not an endeavour free from any danger: beyond the reasonable, moreover, known real-life experience, in which the dreamer's physical context influences the dreams

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12 See Astra Bryant's (2010) review on the Neuroblog of the Stanford University Neuroscience Program, in which, while gathering neuroscientific evidence, she ponders upon the real-life plausibility of manipulating someone's dreams (<http://www.stanford.edu/group/neurostudents/cgi-bin/wordpress/?p=649> – last accessed: 4.06. 2012).

13 Note the film's clever adjustment to the spatial nature of our metaphorical language: while the embedded dreams are descending deeper and deeper *down*, the *upper* layer of diegetic 'reality' is positioned around 10.000 meters *high* on a 747 passenger jet fly.

14 Other examples that use this 'necessary' rule are the earlier mentioned *The Cell* and the horror series *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984–2010), raising the stake of the deadly dream-encounters with Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund, Jackie Earle Haley).

‘downwards,’ these films introduce a peculiar law that makes the actions of the embedded hypodiegetic dreams consequential to ‘upper’ diegetic levels, too.<sup>15</sup>

What does this mean? While in *Dreamscape* the American president’s ‘real’ life is endangered during or, more precisely, ‘within’ his nightmares, in *Inception*, dropping dead within a dream also has serious consequences for the dreamer. Someone who dies within a dream, loses reality and becomes trapped forever in a deep, unconscious mental state called ‘Limbo.’ Being jammed in this ultimate deep level of “unstructured dream space” (Tullmann 2012, 84), on the one hand, does not directly cause physiological extinction on the uppermost level, but, on the other hand, for the person who infinitely experiences its endless hospitality, after a while, it appears to *be* reality. “The dreamer completely loses track of what is real” (Tullmann 2012, 84), or, as Cobb bitterly explains his wife’s, Mal’s loss: that’s how “Limbo became her [Mal’s] reality.”

All things considered, Nolan’s illusory metalepsis of embedded dreams is extended by a fictitious law with ontological consequences. The diegetic rule of a bi-directional physical contamination among the embedded dream-levels makes *Inception* an exceptional case of ontological metalepsis, in which the viewer’s immersion is not disturbed by the “fantastic” narrative device (Genette 1980, 235).

Interpretations that try to ease the unresolved ambiguity of the film’s ending, latch onto this train of thought. Their offering is clear: due to the diegetic world’s, as well as the film’s “problem of underdetermination of information” (Southworth 2012, 35), meaning that neither Cobb, nor the viewer can be sure about what is ‘real’ and what is dream, the best thing we can do is to follow Cobb’s resignation and not fight against but, instead, accept ambiguity. Read Nolan’s words from an interview by Jeff Jensen (2010) about the very end of his film: “There can’t be anything in the film that tells you one way or another because then the ambiguity at the end of the film would just be a mistake. [...] I put that cut there at the end, imposing an ambiguity from outside the film. [...] The real point of the scene – and this is what I tell people – is that Cobb isn’t looking at the top. He’s looking at his kids. He’s left behind. That’s the emotional significance of the thing” [emphasis added].

The unresolved ambiguity allows the emotionally unsettling, but narratively possible theory of “The ‘Full Dream’ Interpretation,” in which Cobb, returning to his children in the ‘real world,’ is actually still dreaming (Tallman 2012, 1920).

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15 According to William Nelles’ terminology, the transgressive movement directed from the embedding ‘inward’ to the embedded, is called ‘intrametalepsis,’ while the one which points from the embedded ‘outward’ to the embedding, is an ‘extrametalepsis’ (1992, 93).

The recognition and approval of this option of relativity, on the one hand, justifies the use of inverted commas around the words 'real' and 'reality.' With this in mind, it may validate Pier's stricter definition of metalepsis as "short-circuiting of levels" (2005, 303), too, shown by the film's metaleptic short-circuit appearing as an ambiguous diegetic loop, in which the Limbo may become reality, and reality may become Limbo. Nolan visualises this logic in the form of evoking the famous Penrose steps (1958) and Escher's lithograph called *Ascending and Descending* (1959/1960),<sup>16</sup> which clearly and even literally refers to that bi-directional logic among the embedded narrative levels; what the film employs as a diegetic rule, and on which I elaborated earlier<sup>17</sup>. [Figs. 3–7.]

The acceptance of ambiguity, that is "The 'Full Dream' Interpretation," suggests an infinitely, or at least indefinitely extended embedded structure, in which Cobb and Mal, after spending fifty years in an artificially created Limbo, wake up not in reality, but only one level up in their multilayered dream. [Fig. 8.] See Cobb's own words about the possibility of losing track of reality while spending too much time in Limbo: "We [Cobb and Mal] were exploring the concept of dream within a dream. I kept pushing things. I wanted to go deeper and deeper. I wanted to go further. I just didn't understand the concept that hours could turn into years down there, that we could get trapped so deep, that when we wound up on the shore of our own subconscious, we lost sight of what was real."

Finally, the uncertainty of deictic hierarchy, that is, the ambiguity of the film's diegetic reality, may plant unsettling emotions in the viewer. Nolan extends ambiguity beyond his film's story, moreover, as the above citation confirms, 'expects' his 'incepted' doubt to live further "from outside the film." The more Cobb surrenders himself to his own suspicion, the more the viewer becomes doubtful about the status of reality and about the solution of the film's happy ending. This idea preys upon the sense that the metaleptic playfulness may transgress not only the story's embedded levels, but the film's diegetic

16 Lionel and Robert Penrose's article in the *British Journal of Psychology* (1958) on the impossible staircase, influenced the Dutch graphic artist Maurits Cornelis Escher's lithograph (*Ascending and Descending*, 1959/1960). Escher, being always interested in the relation between ambiguity and geometry, tried "to capture infinity in a 'closed' composition" (Schattschneider 2005, 241) since, at least, from the 1930s. Figure 3. juxtaposes Escher's 1953 lithograph *Relativity* with the poster of *Inception*, and a detail of his 1959/1960 *Ascending and Descending* with the Penroses' original 1958 drawing and the film's Penrose stairs.

17 Monika Fludernik (2003) examines the narrator's ascending and descending transgressions between embedded narrative levels in detail, as she revisits and renames the Genettean subcategories of metalepsis.



frame too, triggering an outward, extradiegetic emotion that unravels baffling feelings in the viewer. This feeling, whether it is triggered by introducing a theme like the awakening story of Truman Burbank, who unknowingly participates in a television reality program in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), or by questioning reality's reference point through infinitely expandable embedded levels in *Inception*, becomes extradiegetic, existential and, ultimately, viscerally real. The psychologically identified potential,<sup>18</sup> in which the confrontation with ontological metalepsis turns into an ultimate existential doubt, was originally recognised by Genette (1980, 236), who cites Jorge Luis Borges for an authorisation of the idea: "Such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious" (1964, 46). Inviting the viewer by tickling his or her existential emotions, the personal game between Cobb ("I know what's real.") and Mal ("No creeping doubts?") becomes vital as it extends to an extradiegetic level. Regardless of the hypothetical likelihood of emerging extradiegetic emotions, one should be rational and remind the critic, that Nolan's film does not go as far as Cortázar or Weir. Although *Inception* also plays with the opportunity of planting existential doubt in its viewer, as a complex but primarily mainstream film, it does not directly thematise the notion. Keeping most of the ambiguity within the story, Nolan does not really sacrifice his film's immersion for establishing some metanarrative anxiety.

On the other hand, accepting the unresolvable ambiguity may, following Nolan's above advice, justify an emotional experience or, in bearing with my following points, trigger an interest in the mode of storytelling. Ambiguity actually tolerates a balance between these options of 'fiction emotions,' which take as their object a "fictional character or story events," and 'artefact emotions,' which have "fascination with the construction of a film narrative or production design" (Plantinga 2009, 89).<sup>19</sup> Contemporary viewers, as 'nerdy,'<sup>20</sup> "amateur narratologists" (Mittell 2006, 38), more often give up on the story and appreciate the film's inviting and arresting narrative strategies, here conveyed by the fictionalisation of the metaleptic logic.

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18 See the psychotic disorder tellingly called 'The Truman Syndrome' (Fusar-Poli et al. 2008).

19 For more, see Carl Plantinga's encyclopaedic explanation about 'fiction,' 'artefact,' and 'metaemotions' (2009).

20 See Xan Brooks's article, *We are all nerds now* (2003).

## 'Mainstream Complexity'<sup>21</sup>

The strategy of fictionalising narrative features might be familiar to those who have followed Nolan's filmmaking oeuvre so far. For example, in *Memento* (2000) he plays with inverse storytelling as a compositional, thus truly narrative category of structuring the plot. The movie 'diegetises' the main idea whilst motivating its inverse storytelling by introducing a character with anterograde amnesia. Another example is *The Prestige* (2006), in which Nolan toys with narrative features like unreliability, plot-twists and other complex hierarchies of frames and horizontal embeddings.<sup>22</sup> With the consistency of a real *auteur*, Nolan utilises the narrative potential once again when connecting unreliability with rivalling illusionists or tying plot-twists by use of 'the prestige,' which is the pay-off of a magic trick and also of the movie itself.

With his laconic statement, "nothing comes from nothing" (2006, 75), David Bordwell assigns these innovative movies and techniques, which push the limits of narrative opportunities and of their viewers' cognitive abilities, "within a tradition, one that demands a balance between innovation and adherence to norms" (2006, 103). What Nolan does is an intensification of the existing values of Classical Cinema, creating something Bordwell terms as 'hyperclassical storytelling' (2006, 61, 63), and what Warren Buckland describes further by his distinct categories of 'complex' and 'puzzle films' (2009).<sup>23</sup> The film *Inception* offers an excellent example of this equilibrium, which I label as 'mainstream complexity.' The expression aims to capture the ambition of balancing between seemingly incongruous values of accessibility and challenging narrative innovations. In this sense, Nolan is a typical 'post-*auteur* author' (Elsaesser 2011, 247), who maintains Hollywood's rule of thumb of 'access for all,'<sup>24</sup> as well as providing intriguingly complex experiences, mostly by use of storytelling creativity: by inversion, framed twists and metalepsis. Beyond these,

21 *Mainstream Complexity* was the title of a joint workshop-contribution of Annie van den Oever, Anna Backman Rogers and Miklós Kiss at the University of Groningen in the Spring of 2011. Hereby I would like to thank to my colleagues for the numerous stimulating discussions we had in relation to this notion.

22 For a proper overview on possibilities of narrative embedding, see Monika Fludernik (2009, 28–29).

23 See Bordwell on Classical Narration (1985) and on the tendency of Intensified Continuity (2002 [2006], 121–138). Buckland specifies Bordwell's definition introducing a new category of Puzzle Film: "A puzzle plot is intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled" (2009, 3).

24 See Joseph D. Anderson on 'accessibility' and its evolutionary-cognitive demand behind the developing 'Hollywood style' (1998, 10–12).

his *Inception*, as well as *Memento* and *The Prestige*, maximise their appeal by embodying a balanced hybridisation of technological, economic, and cognitive aspects.<sup>25</sup> Let me take a brief look, one by one, at these features.

From a technological point of view, these complex and puzzle films play on the possibilities of new media platforms. Their complex narratives, as often as not, require close readings relying on technical engines such as pause,<sup>26</sup> rewind, and replay.<sup>27</sup> Some directors, such as Charlie Kaufman in the quotation below, put it rather bluntly, as they speak about calculated interplay between narrative and technical dimensions: “what I try to do is infuse my screenplays with enough information that upon repeated viewings you can have a different experience” (Johnson 2006, 164). The balanced metaleptic structure in *Inception* complicates its storytelling just as much as it offers an ambiguous but comprehensible solution to its narrative riddle, however, at the same time, it promises a clearer understanding upon repeated viewing.

Technological interest is closely related to economic demands, which are also served by Nolan’s complex narratives. Joseph D. Anderson’s evolutionary approach makes clear that the above-mentioned directive for ‘accessibility’ was (and is still) a key of ‘natural selection’ in the entertainment business. In order to maximize box-office grosses, one needs to equalise two distinct concepts, both theorised by the television industry. During the late sixties and the seventies, a safe principle governed the narrative schedules of prime-time television. Thinking about addressing the widest possible audience, NBC’s ‘Least Objectionable Programming’ philosophy followed a cautious rule prioritising the formula of the ‘lowest common denominator’ in their viewers’ tastes (Klein 1971). With the new technological platforms and opportunities, the abounding appearance of specialised, 24/7 broadcasting television channels and, last but not least, with the quick exhaustion of possibilities that the rule permitted, the faint-hearted encompassing principle of the LOP model became obsolete. Although aiming for the same economic outcome, the ‘Most Repeatable Programming’ model established and, more importantly, allowed new strategies. Arm-in-arm with these changes of the media landscape, “the MRP model cultivates nuance and depth; it welcomes ‘tricks’” (Johnson 2006, 162), generally, it opens its governing principles beyond a one-dimensional emotional gratification. Without delving

25 This tripartite division follows Steven Johnson’s (2006, 156–184) take on the ingredients of contemporary popular experience.

26 See the usefulness of pausing the image in spotting (close to) subliminal montages in, for example, movies like *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) or *Memento*. The viewer’s chance of detecting these hidden features is dependent on the option of freezing the image.

27 Early examples of strong reliance on repeated viewing were twist narratives like *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995) or *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999).

any deeper into details, it is worth pointing out that the idea of implementing 'depth' and 'tricks' is the strategy which is meant to ensure stronger viewer engagement through, for example, prolonged or repeated interest in a television program or film.<sup>28</sup> Television's "MRP model has infiltrated Hollywood" (Johnson 2006, 163), as we see in Kaufman's or Nolan's cases. The 'multiple entry-point' strategy became influential in Postmodern Hollywood, permitting "'access' to the film emotionally and intellectually" (Elsaesser 2011, 248). Thomas Elsaesser takes on Noël Carroll's thesis of a 'two-tiered system of communication' (Carroll 1982), which, again, perfectly illuminates Nolan's narrative design that combines the traditional emotional appeal with a not less attractive intellectual puzzle of storytelling. Inspired filmmakers and their movies,<sup>29</sup> complemented Hollywood's emotional appeal with intriguing intellectual puzzles, manifested in non-linear, multi-layered, multiple-draft, metaleptic, and other kind of narrative complexities. The success of their innovative creativity in storytelling structures induced theoretical discussion reconsidering narrative terms and analytical concepts (as, for example, this article takes on Genette's metalepsis).

Anderson's argument is actually taken literally by Nolan, who combines economic concerns with ecological dispositions. From the late nineties, the effectiveness of the LOP and MRP models is re-evaluated through empirical, cognitive studies on the viewer. Alongside the sharpened competition among television networks and filmmaking studios, the importance of the criteria of objectivity grew in anticipating viewer reactions. While show runners and filmmakers of the classical and post-classical era functioned as "programmers who develop programs to run on a computer that they do not understand" (Anderson 1998, 12), post-*auteur* authors, who cannot afford the risk of these trial and error methods, become computer operators, who design their movie-sofwarens exclusively for the hardware of human perception. Closing the gap between folk and academic psychology, contemporary filmmakers consciously reflect on and, in the case of Nolan, even narrativise insights coming from cognitive studies.<sup>30</sup> In his films, Nolan does not only incorporate cognitive

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- 28 About the emergence of new narrative forms of television entertainment and the phenomenon's academic as well as mainstream celebration, see Jason Mittell's seminal article (2006).
  - 29 Some early, paradigmatic examples: *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Open Your Eyes* ([*Abre los ojos*] Alejandro Amenábar, 1997), *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Chasing Sleep* (Michael Walker, 2000), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002), etc.
  - 30 On the professionalisation of filmmakers' 'reverse engineering' method, that is, on the cognitive approach to the 'filmmaker-audience loop,' see Carl Plantinga's article (2011, 45).

features (anterograde amnesia in *Memento*, awareness and attention in *The Prestige*, lucid dreams<sup>31</sup> in *Inception*), but, through well-architected narrative complexity, he recreates these cognitive functions through the viewing experience. Similar to the fictionalisation of narrative features, these films ‘diegetise,’ moreover ‘narrativise’ our human cognitive skills into their stories and storytelling forms.<sup>32</sup> The diegesis’ metaleptic dream-structure, skilfully designed by Ariadne (Ellen Page), the talkatively baptised<sup>33</sup> dream-architect of the team, is mirrored in *Inception*’s metaleptic narrative and cognitive experience, carefully designed by Nolan.

The film’s metaleptic structure contests cognitive abilities of viewers, however, this challenge stays within our accommodation ranges.<sup>34</sup> Much as the narrative complexity of five embedded layers is far beyond the classical narrative’s tradition, it stays within the cognitive scope of our memories. The cognitive challenge is perfectly balanced through compensatory techniques of the narrative: it is introduced to the viewer by the film’s setup action, it is restricted by the number of employed layers, and it is compensated by striking differences between these embedded and transgressed levels. Firstly, the film’s exposition, with its triple-layer metaleptic structure, functions as a cognitive training for the viewer, preparing us for the coming, further extended, embedding complexity. This is another consequently employed principle by Nolan, as he uses similar conditioning through a technically reversed first scene in *Memento*, or in the opening line of *The Prestige*, where he addresses his viewers by a telling metanarrative wink: “Are you watching closely?” Secondly, the choice of the number of embedded layers in *Inception* is in correspondence with George A. Miller’s (1956) pioneer cognitive theory about the function of our memory working, or, more precisely about our ‘immediate’ (Miller), ‘working memory’ (Baddeley 1992). Miller’s study claims that one can remember ‘seven plus or

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31 Lucid dreams, coined by Frederik van Eeden, are dreams “in which the sleeper is aware that he/she is dreaming” (Bryant 2010).

32 In this respect, unexpectedly, Michel Gondry’s playful take on cognitive features (on the border between nature and nurture in *Human Nature* [2001], on memory in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [2004], and on dreams in *The Science of Sleep* [2006]) becomes comparable with Nolan’s interest.

33 In Greek mythology, Ariadne helps Theseus find his way in the Minotaur’s complex labyrinth.

34 A recent counter-example is Tomas Alfredson’s *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011). See Roger Ebert’s (2011) perplexed criticism on the film (“I confess I was confused some of the time and lost at other times; the viewer needs to hold in mind a large number of characters, a large number of events and an infinite number of possibilities”) and David Bordwell’s (2012) explication on Ebert’s confusion (“the film adheres to common conventions of modern storytelling but then subtracts one or two layers of redundancy”).

minus two' pieces of newly acquired information simultaneously, that he or she does not hold in any form, does not connect to any other knowledge and does not tie to the stable knowledge of the long-term store (Miller calls these 'one-dimensional' types of information). Looking at the film from this perspective, establishing 5 embedded layers, Nolan challenges his viewers' memory capacity from a safe side. Finally, the distinctness between levels in the film is strongly signposted by different weather conditions (sunshine, rain, snow), diverse settings (city, interior, beach), and contrasting colour tones (see Sinopoli's infographic [Fig. 2]). *Inception* is "unconventionally conventional" (Bordwell 2012) in its intriguing tightrope walk above narrative modes of classical and puzzle (complex?), creative attitudes of generic and auteur (post-auteur author?), and broad values of mainstream and artistic (midcult?).

## Nolan's Cinema of Narrative Attractions

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet (see: Aristotle, *Poetics*, part XIV).

The year 2010, in Hollywood, was indisputably owned by two 'post-auteur author' 'poets.'<sup>35</sup> The clash between James Cameron's *Avatar* (actually premiered in December 2009) and Nolan's *Inception* (July 2010) was more than the usual box-office contest between 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and Warner Bros. The prominence of these films relit one of the most enduring topoi about a film-historical T-junction of two ever-competing paths between narrative and perceptual representations. According to this, Nolan's visually traditional, but narratively radical filmmaking stands against Cameron's progressive, spectacular 3D cinema. While in *Inception* the visuals are subordinated to the embedded narrative complexity, in *Avatar* the story seems to be supplementary to the visual spectacle. See Nolan's above detailed visual strategies as cues for keeping track with the narrative, against Cameron's exaggerated staging in depth, or his single-minded prop- and attribute-choice (the Na'vi's spears, bows and long tales); all in service of highlighting his spectacular 3D illusion. Anyhow, interestingly 'perpendicularity' becomes the common denominator behind the two completely different filmmaking attitudes. Nolan, opposing the current trend of the visual attractivity of 3D cinema, takes on a different dimension of perpendicular representation. Instead of playing with visual depth through optical trickery, he takes 'perpendicularity' metaphorically as he digs deep into a nested plot of embedded narrative layers.

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35 In the referred article, Elsaesser exemplifies his term through Cameron (2011).

Narrative intricacy is an invitational technique of Hollywood films embracing the idea of ‘mainstream complexity.’ Crafty storytelling offers an indirect call allowing the viewer’s capability of ‘being smart.’ As Jason Mittell formulates “we want to be competent enough to follow [...] narrative strategies” (2006, 38), and *Inception* pleases this fundamental wish of the viewer. The well-balanced metaleptic challenge honours one’s participation by guaranteeing a positive emotion: at the end of the experience, the entangled layers integrate, the plot-wrinkles are ironed out, and the viewer’s effort pays off. The release of fictional and/or artificial emotions ensures our cognitive reward.

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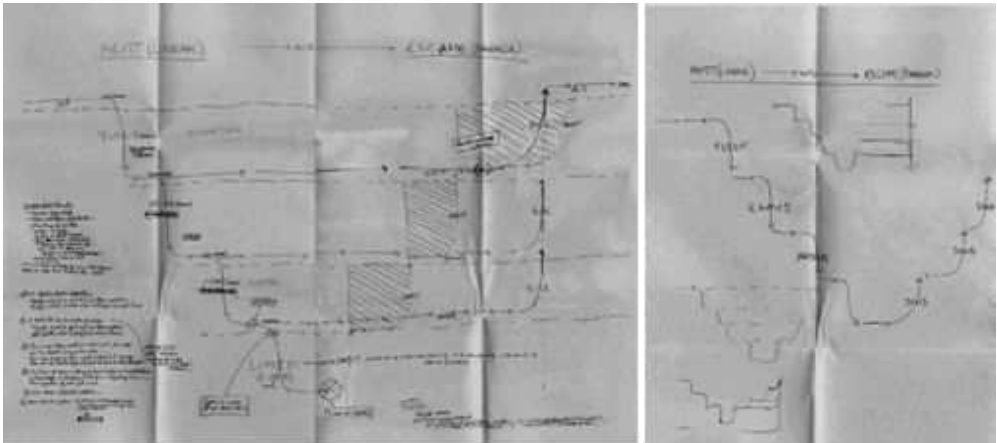


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## List of Figures

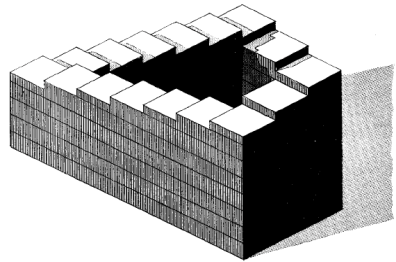
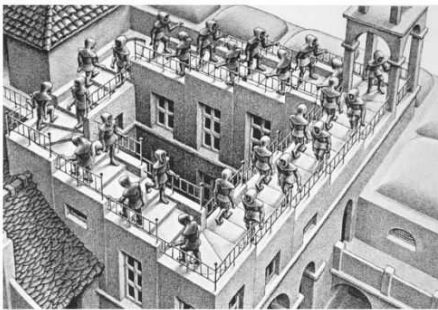
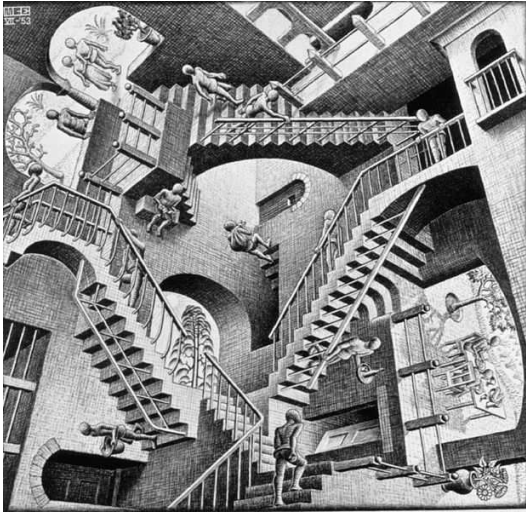
**Figure 1.** Narrative maps of *Inception*, drawn by Nolan himself (2010).



**Figure 2.** Matt Sinopoli's (2010) infographic visualises the layers of the movie (from diegetic to consecutively and consequently embedded hypodiegetic levels).



**Figures 3–7.** Loop-visualisations by Escher, Penrose & Penrose, and Nolan may cue narrative inferences.



**Figure 8.** The narratively possible “‘Full Dream’ Interpretation” implies an indefinitely extended embedded structure with uncertain deictic hierarchy.

